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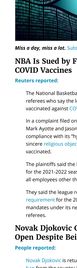
NBA Is Sued by Fired Referees Who Refused COVID Vaccines + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to governments' abuse of power, including attacks on democracy, civil liberties and use of mass surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff



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NBA Is Sued by Fired Referees Who Refused COVID Vaccines

Reuters reported:

The National Basketball Association has been sued by three longtime referees who say the league fired them this year after they refused to be vaccinated against COVID-19 over religious objections.

In a complaint filed on Saturday in Manhattan federal court, Kenny Mauer, Mark Ayotte and Jason Phillips said the league improperly forced consultants with its "hygienic norms," and wrongly concluded that their sincere religious objections fell short of its "high standard" against being vaccinated.

The plaintiffs said the NBA's "jab or job ultimatum" led to their suspensions for the 2021-2022 season when the league required COVID vaccinations for all employees other than players.

They said the league refused to reinstate them despite lifting the vaccine requirement for the 2022-2023 season, consistent with the ban on vaccine mandates under its new seven-year collective bargaining agreement with players.

Novak Djokovic Granted Visa to Play at Australian Open Despite Being Unvaccinated

People reported:

Novak Djokovic is returning to Australia in 2023. After getting a three-year ban from the country just days before the 2022 Australian Open, the Serbian tennis player, 35, is reportedly being granted a visa to compete in next year's competition, Fox31 said January 16-25, 2023.

The Australian Broadcasting Corp. confirmed reports Tuesday that Andrew Giles, the new immigration minister, overturned Djokovic's ban. According to the Associated Press, Giles' office declined to comment on the visa status update on grounds of privacy.

In January, the then-reigning champ attempted to get an exemption for Australia's COVID-19 vaccination requirement to enter the country, arguing that he had recently recovered from the virus. After a 10-day legal saga, Djokovic's exemption was denied and he was deported from Australia on the eve of the 2022 tournament.

Djokovic has been locked out of other tournaments due to his refusal to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Ahead of the 2022 Australian Open, he was ranked first in the world. But despite winning Wimbledon in July — where he was able to compete because there was no COVID vaccination requirement — his ranking dropped from missing Australia and because he was not permitted to compete in the U.S. Open in August, putting him in eighth.

Mental Health Apps Are Not Keeping Your Data Safe

Scientific American reported:

Imagine calling a suicide prevention hotline in a crisis. Do you ask for their data collection policy? Do you assume that your data are protected and kept secure? Recent events may make you consider your answers more carefully.

Mental health information such as bots and chat lines serve people who are experiencing a crisis. They are some of the most vulnerable users of any technology, and they should expect their data to be kept safe, protected and confidential. Unfortunately, recent dramatic examples show that extremely sensitive information is not secure.

Our own research has found that, in gathering data, the developers of mental health–based artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms simply test if they work. They generally don't address the ethical, privacy and political concerns about how they might be used. At a minimum, the same standards of healthcare ethics should be applied to technologies used in providing mental healthcare.

Politico recently reported that Crisis Text Line, a not-for-profit organization claiming to be a secure and confidential resource to those in crisis, was sharing data it collected from users with its for-profit spin-off company Loris.ai, which develops customer service software. An official from Crisis Text Line initially defended the data exchange as ethical and "fully compliant with the law." But within a few days, the organization announced it had ended its data sharing relationship with Loris.ai, even as it maintained that the data had been "handled securely, anonymized and scrubbed of personally identifiable information."

Amazon Clinic Launches Ahead of Reported Mass Layoffs

Mashable reported:

Amazon has launched Amazon Clinic, a virtual healthcare provider that will allow users to get online help for medical condition for "more than 20 health conditions." These conditions include allergies, acne and hair loss. Amazon said in a press release, and the service is initially available in 32 states in the U.S.

Amazon Clinic works as follows: Users first select their condition, then answer some questions about their symptoms and health history. Users may also be required to share photos of their symptoms via smartphone camera or webcam, and provide a photo ID. After that, a licensed clinician will review that data and send users a message with a personalized treatment plan.

In an FAQ for the new service, Amazon says it has stringent customer privacy policies in place and is in compliance with HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) as well as "other applicable laws and regulations."

The news comes hours after The New York Times report that Amazon is about to lay off roughly 10,000 employees. The cuts will reportedly affect employees in Amazon's retail division, human resources and teams working on Alexa and Amazon's devices.

Ex-WSU Coach Nick Rolovich, Fired After Refusing COVID Vaccine, Reportedly Files Suit

The Seattle Times reported:

Former Washington State football coach Nick Rolovich, who was fired on Oct. 18, 2021, for refusing to comply with the state mandate that state employees be fully vaccinated for COVID-19, has reportedly filed a lawsuit against Washington State University, Gov. Jay Inslee and WSU athletic director Pat Chun.

ESPN's Kyle Bonagura reported Monday that Rolovich had filed the lawsuit, according to his lawyer, Brian Faherty.

According to the ESPN story, the lawsuit was filed Friday and includes "breach of contract, discrimination against religion, wrongful withholding of wages and violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act as well as the First and 14th Amendments." The lawsuit was filed in Whitman County Superior Court.

A lawsuit has been expected as Rolovich filed a tort claim against the university in August seeking $25 million for wrongful termination. A tort claim is a prerequisite to filing a lawsuit against a state agency.

COVID Vaccine Mandates in the Spotlight at the AMA's Interim Meeting — Sobriety Criteria for Liver Transplant Patients Also Discussed

MedPage Today reported:

Should states be encouraged to require COVID-19 vaccination for public school and college students once FDA fully approves the vaccines? Members of the American Medical Association (AMA) were divided Sunday on the question.

"By the time these vaccines are fully FDA-approved, that is when we should have a mandate," Frank Dowling, MD, an Islands, New York psychiatrist who was speaking for the New York delegation, said at a reference committee hearing during the interim meeting here of the AMA's House of Delegates.

But Ross Goldberg, MD, of Phoenix, a delegate from the American College of Surgeons who was speaking for himself, said that now was not the right time to be pushing a vaccine mandate.

"In the great state of Arizona, we actually passed a law earlier this year [making it] illegal to mandate the COVID-19 vaccine for schools," Goldberg said, noting that he has been appearing on local media to advocate in favor of vaccination.

Chaotic Scenes in Southern Chinese City as COVID Curbs Fuel Unrest

The Guardian reported:

Crowds in the southern Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou have crashed through lockdown barriers and marched onto streets in a rare outburst of public anger about COVID restrictions days after the Chinese government announced that it was easing them.

According to videos widely shared on Twitter, hundreds cheered as they charged through the streets in Haizhu district in chaotic scenes in southwestern Guangzhou on Monday night. In one piece of footage, protesters overturned a police car.

Guangzhou, home to nearly 19 million people, has been the center of COVID outbreaks in China, with the number of cases surging in recent days. Daily infections of COVID-19 in the city have topped 5,000 for the first time, leading to speculation that localized lockdowns could widen.

'More Than Enough Time': Ted Cruz Calls for Release of Big Tech Privacy Report

The Daily Wire reported:

Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) is calling for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to release its privacy report on social media and streaming services. Cruz, a member of the Senate Commerce Committee, sent a letter to the FTC to demand the report's release after more than 22 months.

The letter comes as the FTC is expected to soon announce new privacy rules for online businesses, with the comment period for the new regulations ending on Nov. 21, according to Cruz's statement.

"The social media and video streaming investigation was initiated in December 2020," Cruz added in the letter. The FTC investigation sought information from tech companies like Amazon, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube on how they collect and track personal information, how ads are determined, whether the companies apply algorithms or data analytics to privacy information, how user engagement is measured and how practices impact children and teenagers.

Europe's Spyware Scandal Is a Global Wakeup Call

Slate reported:

Multiple European governments are using advanced surveillance tools to spy on their own people, according to a damning new European Parliament report. "EU Member States have been using spyware on their citizens for political purposes and to cover up corruption and criminal activity," the report reads. "Some went even further and embedded spyware in a system deliberately designed for authoritarian rule."

The European Parliament launched this inquiry after the 2021 publication of the Pegasus Project, a spyware investigation led by 16 media outlets around the world. Reporters found that governments had targeted more than 50,000 phone numbers worldwide using the surveillance tool Pegasus, made by the Israeli company NSO Group. Individuals on the list included editors and reporters at CNN, The New York Times, Reuters and France 24 as well as human rights activists, lawyers and politicians close to Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist the Saudi Arabian government murdered in 2018.

The report makes it clear that though we hear most often about this technology being used by authoritarian governments like China and Iran, governments engage in spyware abuses, too. Curtailing surveillance harm around the world requires confronting this reality and pushing democracies to uphold a higher standard of behavior.

Exclusive: Russian Software Disguised as American Finds Its Way Into U.S. Army, CDC Apps

Reuters reported:

Thousands of smartphone applications in Apple's (AAPL.O) and Google's (GOOGL.O) online stores contain computer code developed by a technology company, Pushwoosh, that presents itself as based in the United States but is actually Russian, Reuters has found.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States' main agency for fighting major health threats, said it had been deceived into believing Pushwoosh was based in the U.S. capital. After learning about its Russian roots from Reuters, it removed Pushwoosh software from seven public-facing apps, citing security concerns.

The U.S. Army said it had removed an app containing Pushwoosh code in March because of the same concerns. That app was used by soldiers at one of the country's main combat training bases.

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